

Quiet Russia: St. Petersburg as a mirror of Putin's political stabilization

by Nikita Lomagin

Arguably, the most important event in the political life of Russia in the first quarter of 2007 have been elections for legislative assemblies in 14 of Russia's 86 regions, including the biggest metropolis of the Northwest Russia - St. Petersburg. The elections have also some international implications for both Russia's new image as a country steadily retreating from democracy and at the same time a country which can provide more security for foreign investors through building a sort of a monolith between executive and legislative branches of power not only on the federal level but also on the regional one.

The St. Petersburg elections seen as a rehearsal for the State Duma elections in December were the first to be held since the removal of the minimum turnout limit, which was lifted by the Russian parliament in December 2006. In this situation the parties are not seeking new voters, not trying to get more people interested in elections but rather they all target one-and-the same group of people traditionally go to polling stations.

Another novelty of the local campaign was the introduction of a proportional electoral system – also known as the party lists system that requires candidates to run on a registered party list in contrast to a majoritarian system that allows independent candidates to stand. It seems that Vladimir Putin's political credo is very much the same as of the Russian Prime Minister Petr Stolypin who almost a century ago addressed the hostile State Duma with the following call, "Give us twenty years of peace both internally and externally – and you will recognise Russia". Internal stability by all means appears to be the highest priority of the Kremlin today. Quiet Russia is, in fact, what Putin is dreaming of today.

As for the campaign itself and the way how it was run, there are three features which distinguished it from all previous contests. First, political platforms of neither party paid any significant attention to foreign policy issues or any issue related to the Baltic Sea Rim. In this sense, they were local indeed. Second, among the frontrunners of all political parties there were prominent women on party lists. For instance, the rector of St. Petersburg State University Ludmila Verbitskaya was number three in the United Russia party while a very popular State Duma Deputy Oksana Dmitrieva was on top of Just Russia party list. Third, a number of well know sportsmen participated in the campaign not just advocating for this or that party but being on party lists. Among them were, for instance, Olympic champion Yevgenii Plushenko and the captain of the national soccer team Andrei Arshavin. The message to the voters was simple: St. Petersburg does not need any longer political battles with participation of 'strong men' be they generals (this was a common place from 1993 on) or so-called 'successful businessmen' who made their fortune during privatisation of 1990s. The really successful are those who achieved a lot by hard work, and long-term service in traditionally respectful in St. Petersburg areas such as science, education and sport. Another goal was to attract to elections besides traditional voters the youngsters who admire their sport's icons. Was this campaign a success for the Kremlin?

In terms of results, yes. Pro-Kremlin bloc United Russia received 37,37%, giving the party 23 out of 50 seats in the Assembly. Another pro-Kremlin party, Just Russia, came second with 21,9% translating to 13 seats. The only opposition party qualified for the Assembly - Communist Party - won 16,02%, equal to 9 seats, and the Liberal Democratic Party gathered 10,82% and 5 seats in the parliament. The other forces selling themselves as an opposition - Patriots of Russia and the Union of Right Forces failed to entitle them to seats in the assembly, having collected 5,8% and 5,2% of votes cast respectively.

But there was another result of election which is quite a negative for the Kremlin. It is the apathy of voters – nearly seventy percent of voters ignored elections to the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly. A total of 37,501 ballots were declared invalid, according to the St. Petersburg Election Commission.

The figure significantly exceeded that expected in normal election conditions of less than 1,5%, the statistical average of spoiled ballots. Liberal Party Yabloko - expelled from the elections on a contested technicality earlier – had asked its supporters to go to polling stations and write the words "protest", "Yabloko", or other words of discontent on the ballot.

Yabloko officials insist they were cut from out of the political process because they oppose construction of a Gazprom skyscraper near historical centre of St. Petersburg.

The Governor of St. Petersburg Valentina Matvienko who openly campaigned for United Russia – was satisfied with the results of the elections. And this is quite understandable. For the next four years she will be guaranteed from any opposition from the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg. It might be a good sign for strategic investors too who need stability and predictability. The Governor wants to leave little to chance of challenging a number of ongoing and planned projects which might bring to the shores of the Neva river billions of dollars.

It appears that voters in St. Petersburg as well as in other Russian regions put the so-called 'stability' promised by the United Russia far above traditional democratic values, civil rights and market economy. The results of the Levada Centre's opinion poll from December 2006 indicated that only 16% of those surveyed identified the 'Western model' of democracy as the ideal (this same figure was 25% in 1996) and 35% said that they "prefer the Soviet system before 1990s". Another 30% of those surveyed that Western democracy "wasn't suitable for Russia" and 12% said it has had a "devastating effect on Russia". Another alarming data indicates that 94% of those surveyed said they "don't have any influence on the current situation: in the country or that their influence was "relatively small" or even "too small" (13% and 18% respectively). Directly related to this is a very low sense of responsibility among respondents for what happens in the country (82%). In general, Russians appear to have reconciled themselves to the idea that all significant decisions in the country are made independently of their opinion.

The result is growing apathy, as 17% of those surveyed said they would not vote in State Duma elections this December, 11% that they yet to decide whether to vote and 23% said they were undecided for whom they would vote. The worsening of Russian attitudes towards Europe and its basic values is an alarming indicator, revealing the insufficient (if not completely absent) effort on the part of the elites looking for Russian integration into a European system of values.

The Governor Matvienko critics, however, do not agree with her optimism calling the election "a triumph of hypocrisy". "What we got was a cynical trade-off between two pro-Kremlin parties, equally loyal to the President", said Maria Matskevich, a senior analyst with the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. "It was an imitation of choice, and a step toward a fictitious two-party system, with the difference between two cloned parties being only their names. The only genuine and strong opposition part, Yabloko, had been shut out of elections. Nearing the State Duma elections in December, liberal parties were given a clear message".

United Russia and Just Russia were on the ballots in all 14 regions along with the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, whose leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is seen as loyal to the Kremlin. SPS, Yabloko and several smaller parties (the Greens) were also seen on some of the ballots. In a sign of United Russia's strength, the Party won 13 out of 14 regional parliamentary elections.

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